

Public Administration in the Information Age

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Abstract

This paper discusses the changing landscape of public affairs in the information age and proposes new roles for public administration.

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It has been 40 years after the first Minnowbrook conference, in which 50 young scholars were gathered by Dwight Waldo to “redefine the focuses of public administration theory” in 1968. How has the world changed since 1968? What kinds of new challenges governments are facing? How should public administration evolve to remain “relevant”? Reflecting on the legacy of “Minnowbrook perspectives,” I decided to write this critique on “public administration at the information age.” The topic is not about E-government or how governments apply information technology; it is about the changing landscape of public affairs and the possible new roles for public administration, in my humble opinion.

The changing landscape of public affairs

The first Minnowbrook conference in 1968 charged the young scholars to discuss how “public service can better respond to the turbulence and critical problems of our times.” The second Minnowbrook conference in 1988 focused on “public management in an interconnected world.” The discussions and debates are certainly continuing, especially in the information age of today, when we are increasingly “interconnected” not only physically, socially, but also “cyberly,” and when we are all struggled to balance amid the turbulence of not only economic forces, political ideas, but more importantly, information flow.

A few decades ago people started to talk about the “MacDonalized” world of global economy; today we are facing a “Googlized” new world of technically-enhanced social existence. Many may agree that the biggest change in our lives since two decades ago is the constant permeation of information technologies, in particular, the Internet and search engines such as Google. The sheer volume of information exchange gets us entertained, stimulated, perplexed, or overwhelmed. It changes not only our personal life, our social life, but also our public life – how we define the “public” domain, how we perceive public issues, how we socialize, and and how we get involved in public affairs. Presidential candidate Obama’s current campaign has marked a revolution of how individual voters are mobilized through information networks – not just TV ads, but social-network websites, cellphones, or podcast etc – to contribute in the political race. Such fundamental changes are happening not only in political participation and the daily operations of government, but throughout the whole system of governance.

In the traditional notion, governments are entities that have exclusive powers (coercive authority in taxation, service monopoly, etc) to provide a special package of goods (governmental services) to residents within special jurisdictions. Today, I see each government functions like an individual node of information, together with other governments, other sectors, and the public, all intertwined in the huge network of public affairs. In the information age, governments may have to redefine their relations with the public, with other governments, and with other sectors.

The traditional tension between “budget maximizers” and taxpayers will remain, but with new manifestations. Governmental information has been “public” for years, but it

has not been so readily available to everyone. Public participation is not new since ancient town-hall meetings, but never is it so convenient through “virtual town-halls” such as online communities or cellphone “texting.” New technologies make it more convenient for individual citizens to reveal their preferences and to have more direct impact on public decisions, for instance, through direct democracy such as initiatives or public referenda. We may have a whole range of new issues about government accountability. The new trouble for public information is not how to get it but how to sort through the overwhelming volume of it; for public discussions, it is not how to get everyone’s voice heard but how to make a sensible voice stand out; for public engagement, it is not how to get people involved but how to improve the quality of engagement.

More attention should be given to the “horizontal federalism” among governments at the same level. Traditional discussions of intergovernmental relations tend to focus on the vertical dimension, in which lower level governments are treated as agents of higher level ones. The key issues were assumed to be principle-agent problems in coordination or incentives, and the typical topics included devolution of responsibilities, intergovernmental transfers, or unfunded mandates. Today, with much more frequent exchanges of information, governments are increasingly connected to each other horizontally. Either passively or actively, they may compete with each other, mimic each other, learn from each other, or collaborate with each other. As individual nodes in a network, each government has unique contribution of information while enjoying the benefit spillovers from the whole network. These relationships tend to be formed for incentives of mutual benefits rather than as a result of centralized planning, and tend to be governed by market rules, such as scale economies and transaction costs, rather than by bureaucratic rules of coordination. By nature, the horizontal federalism is a constantly evolving process, in which the practice is often ahead of theory.

Lastly, public affairs nowadays are not the business of “public sector” alone. Instead, they typically involve cross-sector governance. The information age has seen dramatical changes in the ways we direct, control, and coordinate the activities that shape our communities. Governance today is less relied on the hierarchical institutions of government that and more dependent on cooperation, competition, and communication in networks that span the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. For instance, welfare provision could have been implemented by government bureaucracies for administration efficiency. Instead, now the decisions are made in a wide variety of decentralized locales, such as regional workforce boards, and the programs may be contracted out to private or nonprofit providers, for the sake of information advantages, I would argue, in service quality or service diversity.

The new roles for public administration

The first Minnowbrook Conference marked the beginning of the “New Public Administration,” which rejected the traditional perception that public administration should be “value

neutral,” and urged that public administration should adopt an explicit value orientation, that is, the promotion of equity in income and power. Indeed, knowledge is subjective, value-laden, and culture-bounded, and thus we should not expect public administration to be an objective social science. Nevertheless, I disagree with the NPA perspective that public administration should be a proactive advocate for the “powerless minorities.” In today’s diverse world, we should realize that equity itself is value-laden and culture-bounded, and even the definition of minorities are subjective. It is a key political question regarding whose interests to be promoted and to what level, which should be left for collective decision in a democratic society. Public administration should not be the judge of equity. Instead, it should act to reduce the information cost for the choice and access of public services, as a disseminator of practical knowledge, an interpreter of public issues, a clarifier of public preferences, and a facilitator of public interests.

Take an example from my area of research state and local budgeting and finance. Since the late 1970s, the adoption of many initiatives have placed additional limits on the property tax levy of US local governments, which, in response, have struggled to find alternative sources of revenue, such as local option taxes, additional user charges, or municipal bonds to be paid back by special tax levies. Many of these options cannot be implemented without the approval of public referenda. In such a context, first, I see public administration as a shared-producer and disseminator of practical knowledge. On the one hand, public administration practitioners are no longer holders of status quo; facing new constraints they need to seek out new revenue solutions. On the other hand, I don’t think public administration scholars can be innovators that create new knowledge to lead the practice. Facing the common issues shared by eighty thousand state and local governments in US, public administration as a profession shall learn from practice and improve practice through learning. We acquire experiences from each other, from other sectors, or from other perspectives of thinking; we distill practical knowledge from earlier experiments; and we promote best practices. We are the agents of experimentation and diffusion.

Second, public administration should be an interpreter of public issues. For state and local revenue decisions, the relevant information is often open, and the procedures are democratic. What is often lacking, however, is the capacity for typical residents to process the information. Public budgeting is complicated. It involves not only good policy intentions but also intricate trade-offs within certain political, economic, and administrative constraints. To make sensible decisions, voters need to have basic understanding of how local governments are funded, what is the current fiscal condition, and what are the courses of fiscal stress. Public administration cannot be an objective science, but it should be an impartial interpreter to explain to the public fact-based information that are relevant and necessary. Furthermore,

Third, public administration should be a clarifier of public preferences. Everyone wants a government to provide better services that are equitable from his standard and at a lower cost, but we cannot expect the public sector to provide “something for nothing,” or to hope an re-allocation to benefit some program without cost others. Behavior economics

has found that people's decision may be affected by how a question is framed, which may be especially the case for budget trade-offs because of possible "fiscal illusions." Public administration acting as value advocates may pose the risk of manipulating public preferences. It should instead act to clarify the trade-offs – among efficiency, equity, feasibility, and revenue sustainability – and help the public to reveal their true preferences.

Finally, public administration should be a facilitator that assists the public to pursue their interests. Local communities may prefer different packages of services and taxation. For instance, some may favor issuing additional municipal bonds to improve education facilities while other prefer the status quo to keep the tax level low. Public administration should not be the promoter of a particular interest. Instead, it should facilitate the pursue of revealed interests through careful policy design and implementation. In this sense, the role may come closer to the traditional notion that administration is "the business of government." The business, however, is not an routine practice of responsibilities following "the principles of scientific management." It involves active exercise of discretionary power in achieving a value orientation pre-determined by the public.